Civilization Essay

Understanding Integration

by Gerald Early

There is a new race in America. I am a member of this new race. It is neither white nor black nor in-between. It is the American race, differing as much from white and black as white and black differ from each other.

— Jean Toomer, author of the Harlem Renaissance masterpiece Cane (1923)

The age of racial integration as an official aim of American democracy was launched on April 15, 1947, when the Brooklyn Dodgers opened the baseball season at Ebbets Field against the Boston Braves. The crowd of 25,623 was relatively small, but more than half were African-American, probably the largest number of blacks ever to attend an official big-league ball game and certainly the first time that the majority of those in attendance were black. They came to see the debut of Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play major-league baseball in the 20th century. Although hitless that day, Robinson went on to become the National League Rookie of the Year and led the Dodgers to the National League championship. Attendance at National League games in 1947 rose from 8,902,107 to 10,388,470, with Robinson drawing record crowds everywhere he went. The Dodgers attracted 1.8 million to their home games, a record for the franchise while it was in Brooklyn. Most of this increase, surely, was due to blacks buying tickets in record numbers, although many whites came to the ballpark out of curiosity, perverse interest or even sheer hostility.

Until then, ironically, big-league owners had excluded black players on economic grounds, arguing that the increased black crowds would scare off whites. The truth of the matter was that white owners did not want integrated teams because they feared a threat to America’s social order. Integrated audiences might lead to sexual mingling between blacks and whites. (Both Norman Mailer and James Baldwin, the two young literary lions of this era, thought that whites supported segregation in order to prevent miscegenation.) Whites knew that segregation cost them economically, but they were quite willing to pay the price in order to preserve their superior racial status.

Blacks responded to their exclusion from the major leagues by forming the first of the Negro leagues in 1920. (Blacks, of course, had professional “nines” much earlier, but they could not organize a league, as was chronicled in Sol White’s History of Colored Base Ball, published in 1907.) Both white and black baseball owners believed that segregation served their interests. Big-league owners saw professional baseball as a white man’s preserve with a nearly all-white fan base that protected the racial status quo; Negro-league owners saw baseball as an economic and social institution that gave blacks a sense of cohesion beyond the bond of unrelenting oppression.

When integration came to professional baseball, it was a one-way street. The major leagues could steal black players from the Negro leagues (few black players had enforceable contracts, and

• Rickey pats Gil Hodges, as Robinson looks on: Turning the other cheek
there was no “reserve clause” binding them to their teams), but the Negro leagues could not steal white players because they lacked the economic resources, the organizational strength and the prestige to do so. In the end, owners of black baseball clubs had no choice but to endorse integration because it was what both the black players and the black public wanted, strenuously so with the onset of World War II and the increasing urbanization of the black population.

Today, both blacks and whites are showing renewed interest in Negro-league baseball, which had been largely forgotten, probably because both groups viewed it with shame and regret. The Negro leagues existed, after all, because whites felt that blacks were inferior beings and incapable of playing on the same fields with them in day-to-day competition. Blacks could not help but see the Negro leagues, no matter how well the players played or how much they enjoyed the game, as a reminder stigma of their race is erased by saying, in effect, that race does not matter.

As the civil-rights movement became more militant during the 1950s and 1960s, there were frequent complaints about “token” integration. This concern about tokenism and about blacks having to be exceptional in order to be able to integrate laid the groundwork for affirmative action, the institution of the idea that blacks should be represented in jobs, universities and other activities in numbers at least equal to their proportion of the general population. (Affirmative action is also meant to serve as a form of reparations.)

But it was precisely the tokenism of integration that gave it its drama, that made it such a compelling moral lever against white racial exclusion. The White House dinner in 1901 where Booker T. Washington was the guest of Theodore Roosevelt; the 1924 dinner party of black and white literati announcing the

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that they were not equal to whites. Separate clearly meant “inherently unequal,” to borrow the phrase the Supreme Court used in the 1954 Brown decision that elevated integration to public policy. Both groups are now attracted to Negro-league baseball because it helps them understand what racial separation means by understanding what it meant before the Brown decision. Both sentimentalize, even romanticize, the communal power of black life before integration, in large measure because they feel that integration has been a disappointment and has run its course.

At this critical moment in American race relations, it is time to reinvent integration by revisiting segregation. For starters, we should recall how black people lived under segregation and how we, both black and white, feel about it now and felt about it then. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of an integrated America as “the beloved community,” but now both races perceive that our sense of community is deteriorating, and neither seems to feel that the other has much to offer. It is not surprising, then, that blacks and whites are nostalgic about a time when segregation at least gave meaning to each of their communities. In the microcosm of professional baseball, blacks and whites find commonly understood heritages and legacies. Perhaps nowhere else can one see so vividly the tangled loom of integration in the United States.

Racial integration—or the ideal of blacks and whites living as social equals—has always drawn its greatest power from symbols, and perhaps for that reason its greatest impact has always been symbolic. Integration naturally involves the economic and political relations between blacks and whites, but it is largely an enactment of a preoccupation with status. It is the act of elevating the status of blacks, a group that carries the stigma of having been slaves in a democratic society and having been considered biologically inferior (why else would they have been enslaved?), by placing them in situations where it is clearly announced that they are the equals of whites, where the publication of Jessie Fauset’s There Is Confusion; Bill “Bojangles” Robinson’s dance routines with Shirley Temple in The Little Colonel, The Littlest Rebel, Just Around the Corner and Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm; the 1936 Olympics where Jesse Owens represented American democratic values against Nazism; Benny Goodman’s Carnegie Hall concert in 1938, which featured an integrated jazz band and paid tribute to both white and black musicians of the past; Joe Louis’s victory over the German boxer Max Schmeling in 1938, when Louis represented American democracy and Schmeling European fascism; Hattie McDaniel’s winning of the 1939 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for Gone with the Wind—what makes these examples of integration memorable is the explicitly symbolic, “token” nature of each event. The idea of being “the first Negro” in any area, especially after the example of Jackie Robinson, fascinated and moved both the black and the white public. And it enabled both groups to throw off the antique racial etiquette that had governed their relationship. It endowed blacks with a sense of dignity, even martyrdom, while forcing whites to examine the shoddy premises upon which they built the myth of their superiority.

Robinson’s impact was so pronounced because he performed so brilliantly, easily becoming the best-known black person in America, supplanting Joe Louis and far exceeding the fame of black political leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, Walter White, Mary McLeod Bethune, A. Philip Randolph and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Robinson was even more renowned than any black entertainer, including Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Lena Horne, Hattie McDaniel and Paul Robeson. Robinson’s preeminence lasted until the rise of Martin Luther King Jr., who was the first black political leader to become a true charismatic media star.

Robinson’s power as a cultural icon owed something to timing: He integrated the most deeply felt American game at the end of a world war that revealed the pathological horrors of racist ideas, and at the beginning of the Cold War, when the U.S. was fighting an ideological battle against the tyranny of Communism. Robinson emerged at a time when colonized coun-
tries, most of them controlled by European powers, were demanding and fighting for independence. There was clearly a growing sense of “color” consciousness in international affairs. Indeed, in 1955, one year after the Brown decision, the so-called “colored” nations of the world met in Bandung, Indonesia, at the first Afro-Asian unity conference—much to the chagrin of the State Department, which thought the meeting was simply a showcase for Communist China. (Adam Clayton Powell was one of the American observers.) In the war against Communism, racism in the U.S. impeded efforts to export democratic ideals to these rapidly decolonizing nations. Indeed, in the 1950s, when black authors like Richard Wright, Jay Saunders Redding, Carl Rowan and Louis Lomax wrote books about their travels in formerly colonized countries, race was a constant theme, and the U.S. was often depicted by the people interviewed as intractably racist and oppressive. (With an increasing number of blacks becoming expatriates after the war, African-Americans generally had more exposure to international opinions and affairs than ever before. Certainly, the black intelligentsia and elite were becoming far less provincial than they had been.)

It may be that Robinson’s remarkable stoicism during his first three years in professional baseball, his decision to turn the other cheek to taunts and insults, was entirely the result of an agreement he made with Dodgers president Branch Rickey, who engineered Robinson’s entry into white professional baseball. But other influences might well have been at work. Mahatma Gandhi, long engaged in the battle for India’s independence, was the best-known Third World leader in the West at the time. His tactic of nonviolent resistance, of converting one’s enemy through love and peaceful protest rather than subduing him by violent means, had an enormous impact on the imaginings of blacks and whites in America. Gandhi seemed to offer the oppressed enormous dignity while giving the oppressor an avenue to change not simply his actions but the way he thought of both himself and his instruments of power. In 1948, for instance, Du Bois called for “a Negro Gandhi and a host of earnest followers.” Sportswriters had been calling Rickey “the Mahatma” for years. Since Rickey read books like Frank Tannenbaum’s Slave and Citizen (1946), about the difference in slavery in Protestant and Catholic countries in the Americas, he was certainly capable of thinking about race on a serious level. Therefore, it is conceivable that Rickey was influenced as much by Gandhi as he was by his own Methodist upbringing in asking Robinson, in effect, to practice nonviolent resistance for three years. (Gandhi was himself an integrationist, believing that Muslims and Hindus should live together in one society and that the Indian caste system should be abolished.)

In the film The Jackie Robinson Story, made in 1950 and staring Robinson as himself, Branch Rickey’s character emphasizes to Robinson on several occasions that he must not fight back against provocation. Rickey had to know or sense that the first black man to break the color line in professional baseball had to be someone who, while he did not fight, had to look as though he could. Robinson was a tough, competitive, fairly irascible man who did not brook insult and was likely to defend his dignity at the least hint of a slight. He had been court-martialed for refusing to sit in the back of an Army base bus, a fact that was not mentioned in The Jackie Robinson Story—perhaps because he was acquitted. As a former football and track star at UCLA, Robinson was also used to competing with whites. He was no whiz with the books, never graduating from college, but he was still more educated than many men, both black and white, who played professional baseball in the 1940s (although several Negro-league players had degrees from black colleges). This meant that he would not be intimidated by the white press and would handle himself well in interviews. Rickey knew all of this when he chose Robinson for “the noble experiment.”

It is worth noting that once the agreement ended and Robinson began to react more aggressively to insults of all sort, white sportswriters and the white public generally no longer saw him quite as sympathetically as they had during those first years. But the expression of Robinson’s anger was an important cultural act and surely contributed, for instance, to the popular acceptance of jazz trumpeter Miles Davis in the mid- and late 1950s. Davis had transformed his skittish anger and cracking rudeness into a marketable persona: He was known as “the Prince of Darkness,” the kind of romantic image that the white jazz-loving public craved.

By the time Robinson took the field in Brooklyn, blacks had been demanding for years that professional baseball integrate its teams. Paul Robeson, one of the most famous and accomplished black men—actor, singer and writer—of his generation, was at the forefront of this movement. Ironically, Robeson’s Marxism later made him the target of Jackie Robinson’s testimony before

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Image: Demonstrators are hosed down in Birmingham in 1963: The power of symbolism.
the House Un-American Activities Committee on July 18, 1949. At a conference in Paris, Robeson had said that it was unthinkable for "American Negroes [to] go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us ... against [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind." Responding to Robeson's statement, Robinson denounced racism, but assured the committee that black Americans were nevertheless loyal to the American ideal and eager to pursue the American Dream.

Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, published in 1944, was the major sociological treatise on race relations and the bible for integration. The appearance of the book was epochal, as Ralph Ellison describes it: "The whole setting is dramatic. A young scholar-scientist of international reputation, a banker, economic adviser to the Swedish Government and a member of the Swedish Senate [Myrdal], is invited by one of the wealthiest groups in the United States [the Carnegie Corporation] to come in and publicly air its soiled democratic linen." The book argued, in the main, that racism had compromised the American creed of equal opportunity, fair play and justice for all. Racism was seen not only as wrong but also as an irrational pathology. The book also argued that the Negro was himself pathological as a result of his oppression; he was the product of an insufficient, degraded subculture. It was only through integration that one could hope to end the Negro's pathologies, restore his self-esteem and make him a fully functioning citizen. *An American Dilemma* was cited by the Supreme Court as one of the sociological authorities on which it based its 1954 Brown decision.

Americans, of course, had always believed that this country was the land of opportunity, where one succeeded on one's own talents and hustle, and where citizenship was based on consent, not descent. In *The Jackie Robinson Story*, Branch Rickey's character berates a Dodger player who has signed a petition threatening to refuse to play with Robinson by reminding him that he wishes to deny Robinson the same chance that the country offered his immigrant Italian parents. It effectively shames the player. The entire Robinson episode in professional baseball served to repudiate American pluralism or the idea that we are a culture made up of many distinct groups and ethnic identities. Jackie Robinson returned us to the earlier idea of a melting pot of discrete individuals. Robinson did not bring with him an African memory or claim to be anything other than an American. It was not expected that he or any black would. It was not a matter of the black choosing whether he wanted to be an American or something else, as other immigrants had, but rather recognizing that he had been unjustly denied becoming the only thing he could be: a full-fledged American.

The essence of the black American's experience has been characterized by separation from whites and the absence of opportunity. (Martin Luther King Jr. used this thesis to great effect. Black Power advocates, frustrated by the apparently slow rate of change, and wanting an alternative to being American, rejected these interpretations, creating the fictive heroic African of the black American mind as a relief from being a construct of the white liberal's mind. King had been a sociology major at Morehouse and believed that the future of black Americans was in becoming American, not some foreign ethnic group.) As a consequence, the goal of integration was not just a matter of assimilating the Negro. Integration also meant understanding the pathologies that result from oppression and giving the Negro a chance to liberate himself from his defects. In effect, racial integration was meant to produce a new race, an American prototype that transcended all previous racial groupings. It was the zenith of the American century, and nothing could better demonstrate the power of the national creed than the total integration of the Negro—the quintessential marginalized being—into the mainstream of American life. That we are now mired by multiculturalism with more rigid racial classifications than ever is due to the failure to consider the evolution of black communal life and how aspects of it could enrich the nation. Blacks were simply expected to be whites of a different color.

Jackie Robinson became the cultural paradigm for racial integration. His story—roughly the embodiment of the integrationist ideal—was replayed again and again by Hollywood, beginning with *Home of the Brave* in 1949, produced by Stanley Kramer, with James Edwards as a black GI who suffers a nervous breakdown while on a reconnaissance mission with four white soldiers. Three of the whites—one of whom is a rabid racist—are unsure if the black has the ability to do the job or to fit in as a team member. The other white is a high-school friend who is killed during the mission. The story is told in flashbacks, as a psychiatrist tries to "cure" the black soldier's trauma. Eventually he convinces the soldier that he is "the same as anybody else." "I'm colored," responds the black soldier.
"That sensitivity," says the psychiatrist, "that's the disease you've got.... You've had that feeling of difference pounded into you when you were a child." In the end, the black soldier and one of his white comrades decide to become partners and open a bar, breaking the taboo of blacks and whites eating and drinking together, one supposes. (In 1962, reversing the polarities, Kramer produced a film called Pressure Point, in which a black psychiatrist tries to cure the racism of his Nazi patient.)

Edwards played a hard-bitten, experienced medic in Sam Fuller's tribute to the infantry, The Steel Helmet (1951), a Korean War combat film. After a fierce battle against the enemy from inside a Buddhist temple, only four Americans survive: a war-scared, nearly psychotic sergeant, a Japanese-American weapons expert, Edwards's stoic medic, and a young white soldier who lost all of his hair as a youth because of scarlet fever. The power of this team—ordinary men whose ordinariness is emphasized throughout the film—is its dedication to the democratic teamwork that its diversity symbolizes. Race is twice introduced in the film. In the first instance, the sergeant encounters a Korean boy and refers to him as a "gook." The boy insists upon being called Korean. The sergeant never again refers to the boy or any other Koreans as gooks. Indeed, he eventually forms a gruff but deep attachment to the boy. The second time race is mentioned is when the American company captures a North Korean officer. The North Korean tries with both the Japanese-American soldier and the black medic to make a racial appeal, asking how they can fight for a country that treats their groups so poorly. He reminds the black about public discrimination, the Japanese-American about the internment camps. Neither man is swayed by this appeal to "color" consciousness, and the North Korean dismisses them both as oppressed men who have accepted the terms of their oppression. But the underlying message is that while a democratic white American (like the sergeant) can be cured of his narrow racist beliefs, the North Korean Communist cannot escape his ideology of color and self-consciousness. The Steel Helmet was the first American film to broach the subject of race in quite this way, and it vividly shows the impact of Robinson on the American mind.

Even more striking was Joseph Mankiewicz's 1950 film No Way Out, which featured Sidney Poitier in his first film role. The bookish, sophisticated Mankiewicz, who loved psychoanalysis, was an important screenwriter and director, whose All About Eve, released the same year, would win him Oscars for Best Director, Best Screenplay and Best Picture. He had won Oscars for Best Screenplay and Best Director the previous year for A Letter to Three Wives, making him the hottest filmmaker in Hollywood. In No Way Out, Poitier plays a doctor at a white county hospital accused by a white racist, played by Richard Widmark, of killing his brother through misdiagnosis. Poitier tries to clear his name with the help of his liberal white superior and the widow of the man he treated. In the final scene, when Poitier is nearly killed by Widmark's character, he refuses to take revenge by killing the man, instead treating him for his wounds. The film was hailed by the NAACP and most black newspapers as a hard-hitting drama about race. Up to then, Hollywood had never made a film about race relations that was so honest or that took black middle-class and working-class characters so seriously. The controversial film was not shown in the South, not surprising for the time, and played in Chicago and Boston only with difficulty and after blacks demanded to see it. No Way Out had two elements that made white theater owners in Chicago and Boston uncomfortable: First, the film depicts a race riot where the blacks win, up until that time an almost unheard-of occurrence in American film. Second, the film depicts the white working class in an uncharitable light, and both Chicago and Boston had huge enclaves of whites very much like those represented in the film's "Beaver Canal."

Whatever else can be said about the virtues and flaws of No Way Out, it probably would not have been made without the example of Robinson. Poitier is a young black man, unsure of himself, placed in a pressure-filled environment where no black had ever worked before as an equal to the whites. He is a very dark-skinned black man, like Robinson, and he wears white a great deal in his profession (as did Robinson), further accenting the blackness of his skin. In effect, the film is Mankiewicz's interpretation of the Jackie Robinson paradigm of integration: Racism is a sickness, a pathology, mostly associated with the lower class; the black who enters the white professional world may be competent but often must rely on the patronage of white liberals in power to protect him, because he brings little from his black communal experience that can help him, other than his determination to prove himself.

Poitier, of course, went on to become a significant actor in the 1950s and 1960s, appearing mainly in dramas about integration or race relations, culminating one stage of his career with his portrayal of the ambitious but frustrated Walter Lee Younger in Lorraine Hansberry's famous 1959 play about integration and black social aspirations, A Raisin in the Sun. Among Poitier's most striking films about integration was All the Young Men, made in 1960 and starring Alan Ladd, an actor whose star was dimming as Poitier's was growing ever brighter. The film is about a young black soldier in Korea who becomes the head of a small combat unit after the death of the commanding officer. Although technically he should have the command, he is less experienced than Alan Ladd's character and less sure of himself. The men also have little confidence in him at first both because he is untested and because he is black. Poitier, in the end, wins the men over and saves Ladd's life through a blood transfusion—an obvious bit of symbolism. The difference between this integration film and earlier ones is that All the Young Men is not about working as an equal among whites but about leading them. It also anticipates some of the issues surrounding affirmative action because a less qualified black was selected over a seemingly more qualified white. The film, a relatively minor effort in Poitier's career, shows how integration was accelerating and growing more urgent in America by 1960, and
how the optimism surrounding it was intensifying. The acceleration, the urgency, the unstoppable optimism—all largely coalesced around one man: Martin Luther King Jr.

**WHAT IS MOST REMARKABLE ABOUT KING IS** that he managed to make integration the philosophical goal of a mass movement of civil disobedience that very much resembled a series of religious revivals. That is, King was able to take a social ideal or, more precisely, a theory about how American pluralism or American heterogeneity is supposed to work—a theory, in essence, about what it means to be an American—and not only invest it with the real possibility of achievement but with messianic fervor. Integration became the new Great Awakening of the United States.

Integration, of course, did not have to be the result or even the aim of the assault against segregation and Jim Crow, much less the instrument of an even larger ideological assault against racism. Nationalistic aspirations have long had a grip on the African-American imagination, probably longer than integration or assimilation, although the majority of African-Americans, especially since the Civil War, have wanted to be a part of American life and have seen themselves unquestionably as Americans. Even the Communists, before and during the days of the popular front in the 1930s, were unsure whether blacks should be treated as a nation-within-a-nation or as simply a minority group whose classes correspond to those of the larger society. Moreover, assimilation can be a hard idea to sell. As Eric Hoffer pointed out in *The True Believer* (1951), the marginalized person who fails when playing by the rules of the majority is likely to feel even more alienated—the marginalized generally are apt to feel excessively paranoid and cynical about what they perceive as majority values in any case—and the marginalized person who succeeds is likely to “resent the admission of inferiority implied in the process of assimilation.” On a strictly emotional basis, it is easier to sell nationalism, which says, in effect, if you can’t join ‘em, beat ‘em.

Thus, the rise of Malcolm X and black nationalism in the 1960s was not an aberration but an inevitable result of the mass movement created around the idea of integration. There were two reasons for this nationalistic movement: First, as Hoffer and others argued, nationalism was the most powerful idea to arise in colonial countries during the Cold War, and black Americans, as another oppressed group, were particularly susceptible to it because it already existed in their historical imagination. Second, the nationalist impulse had been strong throughout American history. The U.S., after all, was a country founded by “separatists.” As America grew, so did the myth of separation: immigrants separating themselves from their countries of origin, and various groups separating themselves within the geography of the country in pursuit of greater freedom—witness the Shakers, Mormons, Father Divine’s followers, and today’s homeschoolers, militia men, neo-Luddites, vegans and environmentals, and various ethnic and religious groups. Indeed, the most mythologized group of Americans, Southerners, are the arch-separatists. Is *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), a brilliant but often reactionary collection of essays by the Nashville Agrarians (a group of a dozen writers, including John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren), any less a separatist-inspired tract than anything written by the most ardent Afrocentrist? Democracy can be frustrating and deeply unsatisfying for a significant number of people; the U.S., in order to survive as a union, has always had to fight the urge of some of its citizens to separate. So it should come as no surprise that blacks, a largely pariah, alienated community, might also want to separate.

King’s genius for selling the idea of integration hinged on his understanding of three important characteristics of Cold War American culture. First, as David Riesman astutely observed in his classic study, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), the change in emphasis from production to consumption made Americans less inner-directed and goal-fixated and more outer-directed and relationship-oriented. As Riesman wrote, “The problem for people in America today is other people.” This change signified a willingness to examine racism and segregation because they were such essential aspects of American social relations. King relied heavily on sociology, which had become a very influential discipline after the war; since the Holocaust could not be attributed solely to innate human qualities, scholars set out to explain human behavior by examining social and political environments. Human beings were seen as social and economic outcomes that could be shaped by external conditions. King also relied on the rise of the welfare state. Like white liberals, he believed that an active, well-intentioned government could correct economic inequalities and perfect social arrangements. (Hooking integration to the star of the welfare state was probably a dubious strategy. The power of the Robinson story was that it had nothing to do with government intervention.)

Second, as a religious leader operating in the political realm, King knew the power of symbolism; he understood that integration, in symbolic terms, was an extraordinary evocation of idealized community. That was what the 1963 march on Washington was about, an evocation of idealized community, an evocation, more concretely, of a new popular front, a new assemblage of America’s progressive and liberal-left forces. Most of the activities of the civil-rights movement, whether led by King or by others, were symbolic: the Montgomery bus boycott; the integration of Central High School in Little Rock; the student sit-ins; the integration of the Universities of Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia; the freedom rides; the campaigns in Birmingham, Albany (Georgia) and other locations. Indeed, King ran into his greatest problems when he tried to use the same tactics in the North, where dramatic symbolic gestures had little impact on black-white relations, because the region lacked the intricate history of symbols and codes that characterized the relationship between the two groups in the South. The emergence of television as a mass medium only emphasized the need for power-
ful emotional symbolism as a way to make a deep political impact on the society. In the 1950s, King knew this better than anyone else. The television footage of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-1956 had made him a media star.

Third, King understood that many Americans feared that continued tensions between blacks and whites would lead to a race war. This fear is at least as old as Jefferson's Notes on Virginia (1785) and David Walker's Appeal (1829). Many prominent Americans, including James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, and Henry Clay believed some version of the race-war idea because they were convinced that blacks and whites couldn't live together as equals in this society. As Jefferson wrote: "Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions, which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."

The cry of nationalism among nonwhite nations during the '50s and '60s and the rising militancy of African-Americans intensified the idea of race war as the American Armageddon. The violent showdowns King forced in various Southern communities were meant to resemble race wars but with some significant differences. Blacks, because they were nonviolent and nonaggressive, were seen as heroic, noble, self-sacrificing people who were willing to die for a cause but not kill for it. The whites were made to seem irrational, unreasonable, cowardly. Racism and segregation were made out to be illnesses. In effect, King's tactic was to make race war impossible by providing his own manipulated version of it. Integration was the only reasonable way out of the dilemma. Who would not want to integrate with these brave marchers? Who would try to defend the murderous oppression of those who opposed it? The end of history was not a victory of white over black or black over white, but rather it was black and white lying down side by side as equals.

The undoing of integration as a social ideal and a realizable social goal can be traced to three main causes. First, of course, was the naive optimism of the movement. Many civil-rights leaders, including King himself, at least for a time, thought that by the late '60s the race problem would be solved in America. When integration met with fierce resistance and scorn from both whites and blacks in increasing numbers, its adherents were nonplussed, unable to think through the implications of its failures. They either became institutionalized moralizers when civil rights became a branch of the federal bureaucracy or succumbed to the new mood of racial separatism. At a certain point, the critics of integration were able to argue against it better than its proponents could argue for it, especially as it seemed to be producing a great deal of nihilism (as "liberation" itself became chic) and violence but little racial understanding. School busing, for instance, turned into an exorbitant absurdity.

Second, other mass movements, generated from the left, began to compete with the civil-rights movement: the women's liberation movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the student movement, the American Indian movement, the environmental movement. (Eric Hoffer was right: Mass movements are competitive and often interchangeable.) None of these movements was exactly concerned with the meaning of American pluralism and none had integration as its aim. Ralph Ellison reflected the view of most blacks when he wrote about the rise of "liberation" as a movement in the 1960s: "I think [the antiwar movement] led to a diffusion of interests and it allowed a lot of nonblack people who were part of [King's] support to focus their energies elsewhere. It let them off the hook when the going got hot in the racial arena. I trace some of the defection of energies to ecology and antitax protest back to people who realized when blacks started moving into their neighborhoods and their schools that they were dealing with something more difficult than just taking a high moral position as they looked toward the South." In short, whites found "liberation" to be a convenient retreat from the rigorous implications of integration in their own ways of living.

Third, the seeds for the dissolution of integration were embedded in the very concept of it. For instance, Ellison, who in 1953 became the first black man to win the National Book Award with The Invisible Man, wrote: "Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway?—diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you’ll have no tyrant states. Why, if they follow this conformity business they’ll end up by forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a color but the lack of one. Must I strive toward colorlessness?... America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain." Ellison’s words were composed when the greatest fear among American intellectuals like himself was conformity, espe-
cially in the witch-hunt atmosphere generated by Joe McCarthy. But Ellison sounds almost exactly like any garden-variety multiculturalist today. It is not a big leap from viewing anti-Communism as an instrument of conformity to viewing integration in the same light or, to use the current term, to think of integration as "cultural genocide." Du Bois expressed such a fear back in 1903 when he wrote about black double-consciousness: "[The Negro] would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world." Integration could only work as an ideal if people respected what they had in common, not simply the ways in which they were different.

The consequence of continuously emphasizing difference, as the multicultural movement does today, is to make difference the only reality. It now seems old-fashioned or even reactionary to talk about what Americans have in common. As David Hollinger recently suggested in Postethnic America, multiculturalism denies choice because it suggests that the sociological difference you represent is your only identity. In the laudable effort to make racism a socially disreputable belief, multiculturalism has made it nearly impossible to talk about human difference except to deplore any discomfort we have with it. The effect of multiculturalism is to make people feel more different than they actually are. The triumph of the civil-rights movement, it turned out, was not the realization of integration but the ascendancy of the sociological imagination.

Even in the heyday of the civil-rights movement, blacks questioned aspects of integration. Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, which endorses integration, poses a key issue: What of the black American’s African heritage? In the play, Beneatha, the sister, winds up rejecting the middle-class George Murchison, who has all the philistine traits of his class as described in E. Franklin Frazier’s 1957 classic treatise, Black Bourgeoisie. Her decision to consider marriage to the African, Asagai, who wishes to free his people from colonialism, is symbolized by her new Afro hairstyle. Hansberry uses Beneatha’s dilemma to suggest that the African-American is freighted with both an African past and an American present that somehow must be reconciled. But the play also asserts that the black American has an American past that both he and his white oppressor must face. Walter Lee Younger (Poltier’s character) acknowledges this past when he announces at the end of the play that he and his family will move into a house in a white neighborhood because Walter’s father, a common laborer, “earned it.” The play also raises the question of what the African-American, from the life he or she was forced to forge in segregation, brings to the melting pot of integration. And it questions the fate of black manhood—a unavoidable concern in a play with an absent patriarch and a young father who seems dominated by women, by his limited circumstances, and by his enormous sense of frustration. It is a crucial point because it focuses attention on the fate of the race itself. Integration as a social goal never answered those questions. It was never equipped to.

These considerations lead inexorably to the Million Man March. For if Jackie Robinson’s breakthrough was the symbolic beginning of the age of integration, then the Million Man March in October 1995 was the symbolic end of that age. The march was the brainchild of Benjamin Chavis, former political revolutionary of the 1960s and later executive director of the NAACP, and Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam and former singer and instrumentalist. In its quest for “unity,” the march was completely about separation: blacks from whites, men from women. Farrakhan, particularly, is obsessed with separation, which he sees as the only rational solution for all questions of difference. The march was an expression of frustration at the inability of blacks to come up with a compelling political or social idea to replace integration and to deal with the breakdown of their own communities. It was a populist complaint against the entrenched bureaucratic elitism of the civil-rights movement and its leaders, who seem totally disconnected from the day-to-day life of the average black person.

This impressive and moving gathering of black men was a clear repudiation of integration as it was dramatized in the 1963 march on Washington, surely one of Farrakhan’s aims. As he recognizes, many black people today view the crisis in their communities as the direct result of integration, which weakened black solidarity and undermined black communal life. In their nostalgia for a mythical way of life, Jackie Robinson becomes a symbol for the failure of integration: He succeeds as an individual but destroys the Negro leagues in the process. The Million Man March was an expression of black community, a statement that black life is to be rescued from within, without white help or intervention. In this evocation of a newly revitalized black community, integration seems beside the point. But the Million Man March sidestepped some pivotal questions: What is the aim and goal of black community? Why should it survive as a desire, an intention, a set of expressions, a memory? Unless

* Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan: Three decades later, a march for separation

The consequence of stressing difference
Chavis, Farrakhan and their followers address these issues, and unless they are able to transform the symbolic power of the march into concrete benefits for blacks, it may end up as a historical footnote, successful only as a publicity stunt.

Integration should be criticized for its failure to recognize what black people had to tell, from their own experience, about what it means to be an American. But this does not mean that the idea of integration is wrong. Integration should be repaired, not blamed for the failures of the black community. It has become a commonplace for many black intellectuals to romanticize the black community under segregation. In hindsight, our schools were havens of black self-esteem, caring and wholeness; in truth they were marred by social pettiness and cruelty, pedagogical tyranny, and frustration. Our churches are remembered as havens of love and sainthood, not (as they so often were) places for social climbing, anti-intellectual preaching, and ritualized escapes for frustrated men and women from their unfulfilling lives. This is not to say that these institutions have not been important sources of strength and creativity for blacks, but merely to point out that idealizing them is as much a mistake as diminishing them. It is true that these institutions have produced some extraordinary leaders, but integration has produced far more. Black people have more money now, more access to power now, more influence in society now. These gains have put them in a position to strengthen their communities in substantial ways. Because integration has made black people a more effective pressure group, it paved the way for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Kwanzaa, black publishing houses, black consumerism and Afrocentrism itself. The problems with black urbanism today are a result of unforeseen economic forces and bad public-policy moves that have almost nothing to do with integration. The inner city is largely the creation of the federal government, which built expressways that allowed employees to relocate to the suburbs, destroyed neighborhoods with fostering public housing, and created a welfare system that discouraged enterprise and disrupted family life.

Black people are right to see their individual redemption linked to the redemption of their communal experience. But the strength of any community is its willingness to absorb things outside itself. Black people have always struggled to have community because, since the days of slavery, whites have never allowed them to function as a true community; instead, blacks were kept in a condition more closely resembling state-enforced isolation. It was this isolation that was terrible then, just as it is terrible now for the black underclass. Jackie Robinson did not destroy the Negro leagues; they should never have existed at all, and it is much to the shame of whites that they did. Integration, rightly understood not as becoming “white” but as a true engagement with what this country and culture have to offer, is the only way to have a vital black community.

The issue of black community aside, integration has come under scrutiny along with the liberalism that brought it into existence. Liberalism says that beneath our differences is a core of common humanity and common history. This liberalism is the essence of American experience, of democratic living. Whites have criticized it because it is often inconvenient or threatening to their status as a majority. Blacks have criticized it because it has failed to deliver on its implicit promise to make recompense for the past. But multiculturalism is not the antitode. It does not provide relief through transcendence but only through social category. In this way, it is an expression of group narcissism. The Million Man March might have been partly right in its skepticism about government intervention, but it was wholly wrong in its exclusion of so many people who are concerned with the problems of blacks today.

Doubtless, many whites are still deeply racist, but the ideal of integration dramatically changed the thinking of many others. Doubtless, too, being black in America still has its severe trials and difficulties, but no black today faces the limitations imposed on previous generations. Integration has opened doors that our parents could only dream about. It is an interesting irony that Martin Luther King, the ardent integrationist, grew up in an extraordinarily vibrant all-black community, was shaped by all-black churches and schools, had a loving black family, and never had any uneasiness about being black. I believe he succeeded in selling the idea to other blacks because of where and how he grew up. Malcolm X, on the other hand, grew up spending a great deal of time with whites, felt uneasy about his race, never experienced a strong black family life, and never had positive experiences at a black church or a black school. He became a nationalist and a separatist, perhaps because he was seeking something he needed, something in the black experience. King, too, was seeking a sort of completion, which was probably why he preached integration.

I think, in the end, we know which man had the more profound idea, judging by who has had the bigger impact on America. As my colleague Wayne Fields has pointed out, Malcolm X had a ready-made constituency of resentful, frustrated blacks. King had to create his integrated audience. Moreover, he had to sustain his followers instead of being sustained by them. This extraordinary feat will not be undone or “revised” by “X” hats and Afrocentrism. But both men’s lives tell us much: We need strong black communities in America because that is, after all, for better and for worse, part of being an American, with a redeemed ethnic past and a sense of ethnic consensus.

But we need integration even more, for that is what America is supposed to be, a place where everyone partakes of our unique mixture, where everyone is part of a greater consensus. I need white experience to understand what it means to be an American, just as whites need mine. The failure of integration has been a failure of nerve, a failure to pursue a utopian ideal simply because it demands much from both sides, especially unwavering good faith. Perhaps we might learn much about “good faith” from the Shakers who sang:

In yonder valley there flows sweet union
Let us arise and drink our fill.

It is, in our great American resolve, only a matter of going.